



ENGLISH AND SOCIETY: BASICS FOR THE EIGHTIES

Graham Little, Canberra C.A.E.

The great age of Australian poetry came to an end in 1788, when English began to smother the native tongues.¹ In 1880, the Colony of New South Wales proclaimed its Public Instruction Act, enshrining drill in the three R's as its mode of education in English. As English in Australia enters its third century, the question before us is whether it will do so with ideas any better than those which informed the first two.

Though issues relating the teaching of English to society take different forms in different countries, the underlying themes are, I believe, much the same. I wish to develop the theme of changing ideas about English in Australia, referring to my previous work on the subject together with some new information, outlining a view of conflicts, standards, language across the curriculum and public opinion.

Conflicts

English and the teaching of English have always been controversial. The distinctively Australian variety of English emerged rapidly and naturally from the melting pot of nineteenth century immigration, resulting in one of the most homogeneous of speech communities.

² From the beginning, Australian English was despised by many in authority. One of the prime functions of Australian schools used to be seen as stamping out the Australian accent – with what success, we can hear around us. Only, in recent decades has natural Australian speech been accepted as one respectable variety. The campaign against it managed to make many of us feel that good English, like Culture, was only to be found abroad. I suppose that to be an inevitable feature of colonialism and its aftermath.

In our colonial days, the three main ideologies which battled one another were, as Manning Clark has pointed out³, the Evangelical Establishment, Irish Catholicism and what was left of the Enlightenment. These bequeathed to us our tripartite education system, with elite WASP schools, some elite but mainly poor Catholic schools, and public schools for the majority, the latter under the somewhat misleading banner of Free, Compulsory, Secular.

For all their bitter rivalries, the three ideologies were alike in their utilitarian, materialistic and authoritarian leanings. Their fundamentally puritanical approach was always somewhat at odds with the hedonism and anti-authoritarianism of many of the populace, but

formal schooling was one area in which the ideologies won the day. In so far as they had a philosophy of education, it was that of training for the workforce. Not that really practical work-training was seriously undertaken; it was more of an exercise in fostering the mystique of the work-ethic by running schools like armies or factories. In so far as the ideologies had a psychology of education, it was that of associationist psychology. All knowledge was reduced to elements to be drilled by repetition, in anticipation of modern clockwork-orange behaviorism. That such doctrines leave out things like meaning, motivation, maturation and the active nature of authentic learning needs to be kept in mind.⁴

In colonial times and long after, Australian children were dressed in uniforms and marched into school in order to work. The language in which school work was described and the organization of the institution carried out consistently the military metaphor of drill and discipline and the industrial metaphor of products up to standard. – the products sometimes being the work the children did, and sometimes the children themselves.

English was drill in the elements: barking at letters of the alphabet (I still remember the way I was misled into believing *of* must be sounded out so as to say *o-f, off*), copying copperplate and taking dictation. This was mixed with plenty of grammatical analysis, formal composition on such non-subjects as Umbrellas, and later, the dissection of selected classics after the manner of Verity's footnotes to Shakespeare.

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All this was kept in place by a plethora of public examinations, administered by centralised state bureaucracies as a closed shop of bureaucrats, universities and teacher organisations, devoted to maintaining the status quo.

Employers were on the whole happy to accept the graded credentials in which the system resulted. It is difficult to discern any dynamic for change in such a system, and such change as there was tended to arise from social pressures external to the system rather than any initiatives taken by the system itself. There was a particular outcry about low standards about 1914, now forgotten by those who assume that there was once a Golden Age. It was universally acknowledged that we did not have an education system fit for a new and independent nation, and major reforms were undertaken under the leadership of numbers of enlightened bureaucrats. There was some liberalisation of the primary curriculum, secondary schools were set up, albeit on a selective basis much influenced by class origin and sex. Teacher education was promoted, and some more enlightened ideas began to circulate.

There was considerable rethinking of English during this period. Composition began to mean the art of the composer rather than the mere compositor of texts, and comprehension began to be mentioned in the same breath as reading. More varied methods gradually came to be acceptable, and there was a gradual liberalisation over the decades. Nevertheless the underlying formalistic pattern remained stable and “progressivism” passed us by. Through a depression and another war, people like me grew up in the system, went off to university and teachers’ college to return to schools to find them just as we left them, and to do what our teachers had done, and theirs, back to 1914.

After some stirrings in the fifties, it was in the sixties and seventies that notable changes began to occur in the hitherto stable state of Australian education. These changes had much to do with boom followed by recession.

First, the boom. There was a population explosion in schools, now including unprecedented numbers of non-English-speaking immigrants, with an unprecedented holding

power of schools in the senior years. This placed great strains on the system. Massive effort was put into producing more of the same, but the very magnitude of the task ensured that something different would result. In effect, a new breed of teachers was meeting a new breed of students, and many traditional ways of operating were inevitably lost in the process.

Confusion was rife, and change accelerated. Changes in the governance and curricula of Australian schools in the last two decades are too numerous to be rehearsed here. Some were planned, many were improvisatory. They resulted in a new role for federal government, and some realization of the significance of class, sex and ethnicity to education in the changing society. The turmoil encouraged new thinking, and I do not believe that it was by accident that in this period organisations like the English Teachers’ Associations were formed by teachers trying to cope, and federated into the Australian Association for the Teaching of English. The level of knowledge about language and learning increased remarkably, fed by the remarkable developments elsewhere in the sixties, but with more than a little rethinking locally. Issues were particularly focussed by the UNESCO seminar on the Teaching of English in 1972. This had a remarkable effect on the systems, all of which reworked their English curriculum policies along new lines.

After boom, recession; cutbacks in education; such unemployment as to call the very work-ethic into question; and a new awareness that for all the changes that seemed to have been made, there was still considerable dislocation between formal education and the society. Newspapers were full of complaints about school, and a spate of public reports began.⁵ I wish more of this public discussion were well-informed, for much of it is attitudinising and sloganising of the most tiresome sort.

In particular, we have had our share of the well-known right-wing back-lash. Many organisations exist in this country to give voice to this kind of view. I propose to list the organisations cited by Smith and Knight⁶ in their study of the politics of Queensland education, with some additions.

The point of doing so is to note that the organisations can be meaningfully linked to our old friends the Evangelical Establishment, Irish Catholicism and the secular Enlightenment, particularly in its fundamentalist free-enterprise form. I do not mean that these organisations really represent the churches or secular opinion generally; indeed I will present evidence that they do not. But they do stem from a lasting historical tradition, and their names make an interesting catalogue of interest groups: the Festival of Light the Council for Community Standards, the Society to Outlaw Pornography, Community Morals in Education, National Civic Council, Catholics United for the Faith, Association of Catholic Parents, the League of Rights, the Institute of Public Affairs, the Conservative Club, the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the magazine *Quadrant*, the Committee to Restore Educational Standards, the Australian Council for Educational Standards and its magazine *ACES Review*, the Committee Against Regressive Education, the Campaign for Responsible Education and the Evolution Protest Movement.

These are small pressure groups with overlapping membership, ample finance (though only one organisation has had proven links with the C.I.A.) and above all, the ear of the newspapers. The press should probably be added to the list of organisations devoted to the cause, in view of the nature of their reporting and editorial stances, as can be verified in any reasonably comprehensive collection of press cuttings. The main item these organisations have in common is the constant reiteration that standards of literacy are in decline. "Literacy" is carefully not defined, and evidence of its deplorable state is lacking, so it is all largely an exercise in rhetoric. A thorough content analysis of the rhetoric would I am sure prove rewarding. Key hurrah-words are the abstract terms, literacy, basics, standards and discipline. The key boo-words are words of personal abuse: permissive, trendy, do-gooder, bleeding hearts and subversive. The tone is one of ignorant authoritarianism, even when professors and chancellors join the chorus. Whenever any

further suggestion is made about the provision and control of schooling, it is .through a voucher system calculated to give schools for the elite more money than ever. Thus the old nineteenth century quarrels live on, but mixed now with technocracy, and a deskilling of society by the silicon chips which means to some people that education for the masses is less important than previously. The arguments are so poor that the situation would be comical, if it were not also dangerous to public policy and to children. These people have every right to express their views, but it needs to be pointed out that their views are grossly erroneous – including their view that they represent public opinion. Let us look at the evidence of these statements.

Standards

The results of surveys based on multiple-choice tests are far from satisfactory, but the basics lobby sets store by such data, so let us see what it tells us. The weaknesses of such test surveys include the analysis (or rather lack of analysis) of the 'basic skills' and their development, the arbitrary nature of item selection and the standards that are set. As well, the tests are of dubious validity in predicting real-world behaviour, and sampling problems also have to be taken into account. Above all, the results, whatever they may be, tell us nothing about why things are as they are, and therefore what we might best do to improve matters. Optimists rejoice that half of the children are above average, and pessimists deplore that half are below, and nobody is any further advanced, except perhaps those who earned their money by doing the testing. This is why such tests on any but a minor research scale are a misuse of public money, not only in failing to achieve what they purport to achieve, but in doing mischief that was presumably not one of their intentions – mischief like narrowing evaluation to arbitrary and dubious statistics.⁷

Whatever the data from other countries, survey data from Australia, for what it is worth, does not support the decline theory. Results on censuses of illiteracy, mass I.Q. tests, comparisons of present generations on

functional literacy, comparisons of successive school generations on standardized attainments tests, and repetition in some states of the Australian Survey of School Performance tests give us five lines of evidence amounting to 45 studies, mainly in recent decades but also reaching back to the early decades of this century and even into the second half of the nineteenth century. The evidence is 44 to 1 against the decline theory. There are various ups and downs, but higher mental processes seem to have improved and lower-level skills to have held, despite various changes which might lead to depression of test scores as time goes on. We have some illiterates or semi-literates in Australia, but most of them are old people. They belong to identifiable sections of the population: the poor, the migrant, the aborigine, the variously handicapped; among the older people, women especially; among the younger, men. These facts point to real problems in contrast to the illusory problems of the theory of general decline.⁸

I have had the pleasure of personally presenting this evidence to members of the back-to-basics lobby and the media, but they generally do not acknowledge its existence, or change the topic or their definition of the topic but go on saying the same things. Their attitude to evidence is so cavalier that one wonders what academic standards they can imagine themselves to be defending. (There is similar response to other pertinent evidence, such as that on class sizes.)

The conclusion must be that the basics lobby's stance on declining standards is readily disproved by the kind of evidence they say they want. One rational interpretation is that the gradual liberalisation we have noted has been associated with hoped-for improvements, but the millennium has still not arrived.

As a teacher I find it particularly galling to be told repeatedly that we have done worse when I know that under difficulties, we have done better. As a citizen I find it particularly dangerous for these people to be having political influence in favour of a non-solution to a non-problem, when there are real problems to be solved.

Language across the curriculum

Recent work in language across the curriculum allows us to check on another part of the basics lobby's argument: the claim that our schools are progressive, radical and even subversive.

With much help from colleagues, students and schools, I have analysed several thousand examples of sustained listening and reading material for students, and sustained speech and writing by students, in the subject English and other subjects (mathematics and natural and social sciences) at ages 7, 10, 14 and 17 years in the Australian Capital Territory and elsewhere. This is a preliminary outline of some data pertinent to the issue of what actually goes on in schools.

One way of looking at the material is to analyse it for content. A simple, short method of getting one's bearings is to classify the nouns according to Roget's Thesaurus (Penguin). In this classification of content, there are three main categories for 'mind' (words denoting intellect, volition or affections) and three for 'matter' (matter, space and abstract relations such as quantity). So far it looks as if school language for all age groups is in the subject English 45% about mind and 55% about matter. For other subjects, the figures are 30% mind and 70% matter. Mathematics emphasizes content such as space; science, matter and social science, social interaction, though it is also to a surprising degree about physical rather than mental phenomena. For comparison, the language as represented in the Thesaurus and so far checked in the media is 60% about mind and 40% about matter. It is in this case that we may say that the curriculum, except perhaps in English, is as materialistic enough to keep Gradgrind from being too upset.

We may also look at the data in terms of function. Along the lines of Moffett and Britton^{9,10} we may classify the main function of item of discourse as 1. Imaginative or literal; and if literal, 2. Emphasising *I* (expressive); or *you* (interactional as in persuasion or regulation), or *it* (informational), subdivided into (a) relatively concrete, narrative types; (b) generalised types;

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and abstract, hypothetical types. The broad patterns for reading material and students' writing are similar. Throughout schooling, some 50% of discourse is narrative-type information (recording what is happening, reporting what happened, and generalised narrative). In the middle school years, an additional 25% is generalisation and classification. In the senior years, up to 15% is more abstract, until the total for the informational is 90% of the whole.

Room for rising abstraction is not made by any marked decline in concrete material, but rather by a decrease in the affective (expressive, intentional and imaginative considered together) from about 50% at age 7 to the 10% at age 17. By far the greater part of the affective arises from the subject English, which again proves to be markedly more humanistic than other subjects. On the whole, however, the curriculum deals with relatively concrete facts. There is no excess of self-expression, concern with human relations or use of imagination here.

For the spoken language, the results are slightly different. In particular, the teacher's language of control swells the affective in student listening material up to 40%. But there is very little interactional language from children, either in speech or writing. Indeed there is much more interactional language of the negotiating sort on television than in schools. All this may seem strange in a democracy, unless it be accepted that the role of the citizen is to obey rather than negotiate.

After the manner of Rosen¹¹ the sense of audience of school communications is seen as involving self, intimates, the public or a strictly academic audience – a use of language as for tests and assignments that is characteristic only of schools. All manner of relationships figure at age 7, but change is systematic until 90% of changes are strictly academic at age 17. The nearer to leaving the less is any audience other than an academic one addressed.

Reflection on such data suggests that the conservatives, if only they knew it, have nearly got the kinds of schools they want. It is well evident that the 'literacy' that schools promote

is selective. It is predominantly materialistic in content, concretely factual in function, and strictly academic in author-audience relationships – and increasingly so with increasing age of the student.

There is no need of 'objective' tests to tell what happens, for instance, to vocabulary. The average number of syllables per word rises from about 1.2 at age 7, to about 2.2, indicating (since English has so many one-syllable articles and connectives as well as key words) that a considerable number of polysyllabic words are being brought into use. These would be, it should be noted, words for material phenomena rather than for things of the mind or human relationships and the like. The spelling error rate settles down to some 2% of the words students use in the normal course of their work. (It can be sent up by testing them on words they don't use, but what would be the point?). There is also a systematic development in the complexity of syntax. A good index of this is the number of words per sentence, redefining a 'sentence' as a T-unit or a C-unit, meaning either a sentence in the normal sense of the term or a co-ordinate principal clause beginning with 'and'. In informational discourse, 'sentence' length is equal to or less than the children's age in years. In imaginative discourse, it hovers around 10 words. Simple sentences tend to be used for recording, compound sentences for reporting and the imaginative, phrase-elaborated sentences for generalising, and complex sentences for the abstract and hypothetical. There is thus in reading material and writing systematic, progressive differentiation of syntax by function, in successive approximation to the adult model, the growing control is further illustrated by the fact that the full stop is correctly placed about 50% of the time at age 7, increasing to about 100% at about age 16. Teacher speech has much about it of the trends noted in written material, but pupil speech tends to be relatively restricted. The development of literacy is thus systematic but highly selective, one might almost say lopsided. But it does take place, and it does not need external tests or examinations to prove it.

Along these lines I would maintain that what actually happens in schools is a long way from

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anything particularly trendy or progressive. English is more liberal and humanistic than other subjects, according to its current official brief, and perhaps its very nature, but it is not radically so, and on the whole the curriculum is traditional or conservative in its use of language, despite what the basics lobby claim to the contrary.

Public opinion

We have seen so far that the claims of the basics lobby about standards are refuted by survey data of the kind they claim to favour; and that their claims that the schools are excessively progressive are refuted by data on language across the curriculum. Now let us examine the claim that public opinion is in favour of increasing routinised drills and disciplines.

Dr C.W. Collins of Canberra C.A.E. has completed two significant studies of public opinion about the aims and achievements of schools.¹² Various surveys exist to show that those in touch with schools tend to be more favourably disposed towards them than those who are not.¹³ Dr Collins takes up this issue in greater depth. The first study uses questionnaires to discern the opinions of thousands of secondary students in government and Catholic schools in several states – together with the opinions of these students' parents and teachers. The second study uses open-ended questioning in interviews to elicit the views of 20 year olds looking back on their schooling. These people come from three stages, and the data includes the opinions of students and their tutors; employees and their employers, and unemployed young people and their counsellors. The design of the studies is elegant, and what is most remarkable is the consistency of attitudes, whether those of the young people or of those associated with them; or whether elicited by questionnaire or interview.

All of these categories of people are virtually unanimous on the following points:

1. The 'basics' are indeed basic. They are on the whole well catered for, though a few still miss out. But competence in the spoken language ought also to be accounted basic,

and is unjustly neglected in the schools.

2. The academic subjects are well looked after but are greatly overrated in importance by the schools.
3. Matters such as personal development and practical social competence are of vital importance, and much neglected by the schools.

This pattern of results raises the question of whether schools can do what the people want them to do if they are constituted as they are. It is not a question (as some of the press have made out) of apportioning blame, but of looking at the very structures and the extent to which they condition the types of communication and hence learning that may take place. Whatever the case in this respect, public opinion as researched in this way is contrary to the views of the basics lobby in matters both of fact and values. Public opinion is in accord with the data on standards and language across the curriculum, suggesting that the curriculum is still rather narrow; and public opinion is also in contradiction of the claims of the basics lobby that the curriculum ought to be even narrower.

Into the eighties

The political situation is that the basics lobby and the media present one kind of picture; while public opinion and the findings of careful research present a contrary picture. Evidently English is carrying out its proper liberalising function more than other subjects, but not enough to satisfy the real demands of the public whatever the lobbies and the technocrats say. This leaves us with the problem that small, decreasing but still identifiable segments of the population are still missing out on 'basics,' on what schools are supposed to offer them. It also raises the problem of how much further schools can go along the desired lines while they are structured as they are – with large classes and formal constraints of so many kinds. These are real problems, in contrast to the non-problems central to the concerns of the basics lobby.

Conflict and opposition to education as distinct from training are not new in this country or

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other countries. I think we should take courage from the kinds of evidence we have examined to continue the struggle to build on the language children bring to school so as to help them become fully self-respecting, active participants in the society. Let us know and respect our enemies, and take heart from the fact that the people are very much on our side, despite what it says in the papers.

References

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